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A Temple of Pleasure, A Temple of Art: The Structural and Social Veneers of Opulence in Charles Garnier’s Paris Opéra

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Abstract
At the height of opulence in Second Empire France, Napoléon and Haussmann’s restructuring of Paris called for the construction of a new opera house, selecting from a smorgasbord of competitors the architectural design of the virtually unknown Charles Garnier. The plan employed all manner of techniques in order to present its decoration and composition as a veritable litany of formal styles, combining the Neoclassical with the Néobaroque, all with an affinity for the Beaux-Arts. Garnier’s vision implements modern technologies, while also rediscovering classic methods, and utilizes atypical materials to achieve classic ends, ultimately establishing the space as truly eclectic masterpiece, that, in its opulence, stands as a monument to Second Empire decadence. In reaction to the Opéra’s inauguration, Duelin de la Mouzelle writes that the “gay, splendid edifice responds perfectly to the idea that we shall have one day of the Imperial era.” The empire, the building’s construction, and contemporary Paris itself, however, stand at the edge of a precipice, with social and structural revolutions promising an end to such unchecked splendor, manifested in the advent of iron architectural construction. L’Opéra seemingly participates with a dying aesthetic, however, despite its veneer of grandeur, in its construction the building engages in conversation with these developing technologies and ideas, implementing them in ways that bolster traditional ends. In this way, Garnier’s Opéra transcends its clinical opulence, instead notably participating in the social and cultural movement of late nineteenth century France.

Comments
Art History Senior Thesis

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Protruding from its place in what has become one of the most fashionable districts in Paris, l’Opéra Garnier\(^1\) is at the apex of Parisian opulence, a category that undoubtedly does not lack contenders. Charles Garnier’s opera house, however, stands alone, a building whose entire essence is an homage to the celebration of decadence, with the visual opulence it pronounces a prelude to the aural splendor of the lyric art it houses. In every constructive element, Garnier strives to present an annunciation of that spectacle, maximizing his budget in order to create an edifice that, at the height of its opulence, is vertiginous in effect. As Garnier himself details, “the Opéra is not only the ‘Temple of Pleasure,’ it is also and above all the Temple of Art, and exceptional art that speaks to the eyes, ears, heart, and passions; in other words, that involves all resources of human organization.”\(^2\) However, in his writings, the architect meticulously justifies his building’s budget, laboriously outlining his efforts to achieve a level of splendor that belies his actual expenditure. To achieve this end, Garnier often works to reinitiate Classical media, asserting the merit of ornate marble polychromy and mosaic art; however, and further, it is the architect’s push for innovation that defines the decadence of the monument, presenting unfamiliar and extremely efficient methods of execution to achieve the desired level of decorative splendor, a trend most notable in the application of gilt and mosaic.

Despite these efforts, the social and political upheaval of late nineteenth century France promised the demise of Garnier’s monument even before its completion, as general popular opinion questioned the prudence of further expenditure on a building that was perceived as the spoils of an antiquated, and ill-favored, elitist era. I, however, endeavor to explicate upon the efforts of Garnier and his commissioned artists to create a structure that would not serve as a

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\(^1\) The edifice possesses numerous nomenclatures. For the purpose of this paper, it will be referred to as l’Opéra Garnier, l’Opéra or le Palais Garnier.

representation of social barriers, but instead participate in the spectacle that defines the Parisian aesthetic. Decorative and structural elements converge with the conceptual clarity of the monument in order to rectify a space that is not, indeed, a simple iteration of the self-reverential imperialism of the Seconde Empire. Through its progressive and unique plan, the Opéra instead participates in the altering society of the era, the signs of which had already become clear in the political turmoil before Louis-Napoléon’s 1851 coup d’état. While it may have been destined for the silks of Seconde Empire bourgeois, the grandeur of the Opéra’s aesthetic is inextricably linked to scopophilia, an indulgence intuitively shared among Parisians and manifested in the image of the flâneur. This flânerie, termed so by Edmond Texier in his 1852 Tableau de Paris, revels in “the public spectacle of people sauntering before the gaze of others… [and] by the 1840s, and continuing through the Second Empire, flânerie was synonymous with the same Grands Boulevards on which the Opéra would be built.”³ As this insouciantly hedonistic Parisian cultural trait was unsettlingly disrupted during the Prussian pressures of 1870 and the subsequent political unrest, it is ultimately this celebration of visual pleasure embodied in the monument’s construction that saves the Opéra from dereliction. The decorative opulence that had once been perceived as the spoils of the Seconde Empire evolved to celebrate the Parisian predisposition for the harmonized beauty of art, that, essentially, as a theatre, the Opéra memorializes. In this way, Garnier’s Opéra, while unable to be extricated from its historical impetus, supersedes its appointed bounds, employing in its execution unprecedented materials and techniques to signal a divergence from the confines of tradition, and, in so doing, places the edifice in conversation with the more and more quickly evolving social situation of late nineteenth century France. Essentially, Garnier’s monument to lyric art engenders a sphere that

presents a visual fête, celebrating the supreme beauty and glory of the arts, as sphere that at the
time was beginning to grow more and more universally accessible.

*The Opera in Paris*

The suggestion of the construction of a new opera house was not a novel concept to the
Seconde Empire – in fact, it was anything but. Jacques-François Blondel, in his 1752 publication
*L’Architecture Françoise*, outlines the “three basic requirements in the design of French
theaters” unrealized at that historical moment.4 Pre-dating the Haussmannian agenda, Blondel
“first asserted the architect’s urbanistic responsibility to locate the theater on a spacious site
reached by several streets, and to integrate the theater with that site through an exterior
colonnade, porch, or peristyle.”5 He then criticizes the Italian style of auditorium of enclosed,
tightly-arranged opera boxes, “suggesting instead what would become the classic French type
that used recessed partitions to create more open tiers of balconies,” and in so doing urging
divergence from antecedent models to engender a greater sense of harmony and utility.6 Lastly,
Blondel demands visual clarity of the edifice in that it “clearly indicate[s] its function on the
exterior, while also expressing ‘la magnificence et l’opulence de la Capitale où il est élevé’ (the
magnificence and opulence of its Capital).”7 In these predetermined demands, it becomes clear
that Garnier’s construction springs from a century-old desire for a more suitable environment for
the theater, previously pitched about the Parisian landscape from salle to salle.

The Parisian opera before the construction of the Palais Garnier processed through eight
separate theaters, the “first four [of which] were makeshift theaters” that failed to act in
conversation with Blondel’s constraints, instead extending the model of the “*jeux de paume* or

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4 Ibid., 45.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
salles des fêtes” that presented a “rectangular auditoria behind inexpressive facades.”

Chronologically, the first instance of what can truly be considered an opera house within Blondel’s definition was constructed by Pierre-Louis Moreau Desproux at Palais Royal (1770), followed by Samson-Nicolas Lenoir le Romain’s salle de la Porte St.-Martin (1781) and Victor Louis’ salle at rue Richelieu (1794). Here drawing from his previous architectural endeavor of the Grand Théâtre in Bordeaux in which Louis “perfected the scheme of open balcony boxes and integrated the ellipse and ancient semicircle to create a horseshoe plan,” Louis developed a plan in Paris that can be perceived as an architectural antecedent for Garnier’s Opéra. The theatrical life of Paris remained at the salle at rue Richelieu, which was fully restored by François Debret in 1819 and 1820, only to be abandoned shortly after. “On 13 February 1820, the Duke of Berry, the heir presumptive to the throne, was assassinated at the theatre, after which Louis XIII decided to raze it.” The architect who had so diligently restored the Richelieu salle the year before, François Debret, was commissioned to divine a solution for the absent Opéra, and quickly constructed the salle Le Peletier, which remained in use for the next half-century, despite its intention as a temporary solution. It was unsuited to the demands of the Parisian theatrical culture, as it only sat “1800 spectators” and, “except for its auditorium, praised for its excellent acoustics, the building was a chaotic jumble of spaces that pleased no one.” In 1841, the building was damaged by fire, and the discussion of a competition was considered: “It was discussed officially in 1845 and 1846, and the intention of holding a competition was even

8 Ibid.
9 Ibid., 48.
11 « Sa capacité était de mille huit cent spectateurs. » Marrey, 10.
12 Mead, 50.
announced publicly in January 1847, but a lack of funds prevented its realization.”

Contrary to Blondel’s definition, the salle Le Peletier was built in a congruence of tight streets, impeding access. This location became a particular issue when its inconveniences became glaringly clear to Emperor Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte on the 14 January 1858. In an era of political turmoil in Italy, Felici Orsini, “a native of Romagna… hoped, by eliminating the emperor, to provoke a revolution in France that would have spread to Italy.” Thus, he “launched three bombs that exploded in front of the Emperor’s car just before his arrival at the Opéra; there were eight deaths and 100 injured. The tightness of the streets and the difficulty of emergency access relaunched the project for a new grand theatre.”

On 29 December 1860, after the much-debated selection of its location, an architectural contest for the plan of the new Opéra was launched.

B. Marrey, in his 2001 introduction to Garnier’s serial collection of writing on his monument, notes that the choice to select an artist through open competition was “not typical of the époque.” Instead, like its numerous predecessors, the selection of an architect for the Opéra was to be a bureaucratic affair, one decided behind closed doors and based in a system of patronage. Achille Fould, the contemporary ministre d’État, “had addressed Rohault de Fleury,” but with the change of ministres, this selection was usurped and the contest opened. In this way, the context of the Opéra’s construction serves as an iteration of the administrative “changes

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13 Ibid.
15 « Felice Orsini lança três bombes qui explosèrent devant et sous sa voiture juste avant son arrivé devant l’Opéra ; il y a huit morts et cent cinquante blessés. L’étroitesse de la rue, les difficultés d’accès pour les secours relancèrent le projet d’un grand théâtre. » Marrey, 10.
16 « Le 29 décembre, un concours d’architecture était lancé. » Ibid.
17 « Ce n’était pourtant pas dans les habitudes de l’époque. » Ibid., 11
18 « Avait fait dresser un projet à M. Rouhault de Fleury » qtd. Ibid.
of the political system.”¹⁹ Napoléon III was particularly aware of his need to publicly present a liberalized image of his regime, one that, with his 1851 coup d’état, rose to power through the usurpation of the republican ideal. Further, with the assassination attempt of 1858, a burst of social and political tension erupted in Paris, as “the ministres called for an authoritarian reaction, and in several regions, particularly in working-class centres, the police and public prosecutors imposed a climate of intimidation and terror.”²⁰ Thus, in an attempt to assuage the fears of totalitarianism, Napoléon III and the selection committee, “as proof of liberalism in architecture, opened the door to all candidates.”²¹ Out of 171 applicants, the jury, composed of almost expressly architects, unanimously selected the plan of the relatively unknown, yet classically-trained Prix de Rome winner Charles Garnier on the 22 February 1861.²² Heralded for its “simplicity, clarity, logic, grandeur, and the exterior dispositions that split the plan into three distinct parts: public foyers, salle, and scene.”²³

Visually, the plan of the Opéra is, indeed, straightforward. In his writings on the edifice, Garnier asserts that his style’s “compositional principle is Greek or Roman, […] but it indicates above all a great proclivity toward truth.”²⁴ Despite its eclecticism of sources, Garnier clearly

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¹⁹ “Un changement de politique” Ibid.
²⁰ Plessis, 144.
²¹ “C’était évidemment faire aussi preuve de libéralisme dans le domaine de l’architecture que d’ouvrir la porte à tous les candidats.” Marrey, 11.
²² Ibid.
²³ “Le plan, qui était remarquable de simplicité, de clarté, de logique, de grandeur, et pour ses dispositions extérieures qui accusaient le plan en trois parties distinctes : les foyers public, la salle et la scene.” qtd. Mead, 78.
²⁴ qtd. Fontaine exterior, 35.
works within the Beaux-Arts affinity for “elementary geometrical forms – of which the circle
and sphere must have our absolute preference.”25 Fundamentally,

two intersecting rectangles organize the Opéra’s plan… divid[ing] the plan into
the two halves of public and theater spaces, which subdivide into the Opéra’s four
sections of (1) vestibules, foyers, and staircases; (2) auditorium; (3) stage; and (4)
administration buildings. The vestibules, auditorium, and stage are contained by a
continuous circulation rectangle. … The plan thus simultaneously articulates the
Opéra’s two programmatic halves and four functional sections, while it
distinguishes the triad of vestibules, auditorium, and stage as theater’s core.26

The successful grouping of the plan’s basic geometric elements presents an edifice that is truly
balanced and harmonious in its symmetry. It is this harmony of visual experience that
preoccupies Garnier’s decorative endeavors, striving to intimate the Ancient message that “art is
a dream of perfection and beauty.”27 This topic will be further explored subsequently; however,
here I would like to discuss the ways in which the Opéra’s plan, in its architectural divisions of
space and suggestion of circulation, can be seen to interestingly speak to the social space
established by the Opéra.

Social Movement in the Seconde Empire

By and large, the Seconde Empire itself does not present an image of social revolution;
however, it suggests a movement towards a more egalitarian, rather than elitist, social
philosophy. Despite the political turmoil that enshrouded the eighteenth century in France,
socially, the populace remained quite stagnant, if not harmed. Social borders were even tangibly
defined, inescapable in the Parisian geography. “Previously, rich and poor had lived in the same
neighbourhoods, often in the same buildings, the former occupying only the lower storeys”;

and nineteenth century French architecture, ed. Robin Middleton (Cambridge, Massachusetts:
The MIT Press, 1982), 14.
26 Mead, 79-80.
27 Fontaine exterior, 40.
however, the early years of the Seconde Empire witness a rigid segregation of these groups: “On the one hand, the quarters inhabited primarily by the well-to-do (the centre) or the rich (the west); on the other, the popular arrondissements to the north (the population of Les Batignolles soared from 5,000 to 65,000), east and south, teeming with newly-arrived immigrants and the poor expelled from the centre.” Overwhelmingly, the population was composed of the inhabitants of these arrondissements, as “in Paris in 1862, Haussmann calculated that the number of poor who would have to be fed at the slightest rise in food prices would be at least 1,200,000 (that is, over 70 percent of the population).” The working class was segmented into that of the ouvrier and the proletariat, or rather, the skilled, working class elite, and the unfortunate laborers of the modern factory. The decline of the former is less well documented throughout the Seconde Empire; however, the plight of the latter is immortalized in art as well as literature, in such canonical writers as Victor Hugo and Émile Zola. Man, woman and child employed in factory labor, “their lot seems to have been particularly wretched and their sufferings acute. In order to round off the family income, the wife would prostitute herself (this was known as the ‘fifth quarter’ of her day), and often the entire family succumbed to alcoholism.” This proletariat is often described as rural transplants, and Alain Plessis interestingly notes that often their migration to the city is catalyzed by the labor demands of construction. From rural locales, workers were temporarily employed in the building industry: “The département of the Creuse alone sent up an average of 30,000 of these temporary migrants every year.” The aggressive restructuring of the city by Haussmann “led to a greater concentration of the working-class population in the capital, and thus increased the social peril,” as the suffering populace enlarged

28 Plessis, 124.
29 Ibid., 102.
30 Ibid., 112.
31 Ibid., 110.
with little amelioration of their distress.\textsuperscript{32} Instead, “the poor and the non-poor were two human breeds whose fates diverged.”\textsuperscript{33}

Where, then, does the Opéra situate in this social climate? Visibly, it is tied to the decadent and to the elite; however, by grace of Garnier’s heritage it is also a derivative of the working-class. Born at 264 rue Mouffetard in Paris to a blacksmith and a lace maker, Garnier’s life had “an unpromising start in one of the worst Parisian slums.”\textsuperscript{34} However, through his father’s diligence and desire for self-improvement, Garnier was given access to an apprenticeship to an architect, which, though ultimately short-lived,\textsuperscript{35} “promised to place Garnier on the other side of the line separating the working and middle classes.”\textsuperscript{36} Most notably, though, Garnier was given access to a primary education, an incredible luxury from which “in 1840, only fifty-one out of a thousand Parisian children” benefited.\textsuperscript{37} In this way, Garnier himself participates in the social movement of which the edifice is perceived as ignorant. The graduation of spatial separation in the plan of the Opéra, from vestibules to auditorium to stage, progresses with each step into the more intensely exclusive, and in this way parallels the social boundaries of the époque. The vestibules are publicly accessible and the site of constant movement, easily accessible and sporting mostly fluid boundaries, save the sole defined, rigid divide barring entry to the auditorium. The auditorium accelerates the decorative scheme, transitioning into a world defined by gold and red velvet. However, movement is restricted in the auditorium – the seat in which one has been placed is immutable. And, on stage, play the players, interminably disconnected from any reality other than that fiction they have imagined for themselves. In this

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 121.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 100.
\textsuperscript{34} Mead, 9.
\textsuperscript{35} “Garnier was removed by his mother after only eight days in the man’s office.” Ibid.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 10.
way, Garnier’s construction quite literally puts this social graduation on stage, making it a spectacle. As a monument, it acts functionally, with its form embodying and representing its function as a theatre. The Opéra, in its blueprint, acknowledges the social spheres of nineteenth century society; however, the decorative scheme of the building continually strives to “blur and make one forget the border between the stage and spectator’s world,” and with the evolution of theatrical conventions that engendered a greater emphasis laid on circulation during intermission, Garnier’s monument deconstructs these predetermined barriers, placing the entire audience in an egalitarian social position.38

A further manifestation of separation is found in the varying entrances to the monument. Competition requirements mandated the plan envision three distinct entrances, including an “imperial carriage entrance,” a “carriage entrance for the abonnés” and a frontal entrance through the peristyle façade.39 The first opened to “an isolated space for the imperial suite, through this separate access, to reception areas, salons particuliers, and, finally, a private loge, traditionally placed at the left of the auditorium,” an essential expression of privilege.40 The space was never realized, however, as its completion was derailed by the collapse of the Empire. The entrance for abonnés, or subscribers, rather than simply acting as a reserved entrance for so-called season ticket holders, is specifically isolated for patrons arriving in horse-drawn carriages, and as such serves as an annunciation of economic status. Situated along the lateral façade of the building at the intersection of rue Scribe and rue Auber, its location elicits a sense of privilege, of

38 Fontaine exterior, 21.
39 Mead, 63.
detour from the norm, which is represented by the greater public’s frontal entrance directly through the monument’s magnificent façade (fig. 1). It is in this façade that Garnier announces the “fundamental characteristics” of his work, presenting “the alliance of tradition and innovation, order and celebration, and lyricism, … [all] transformed by a sort of imaginative, joyous whirl, decorative profusion, and polychromy.” The façade “announces and manifests what is waiting for the spectators on the interior,” and, as in the conceptual construction of the plan, here the visual effect rendered by Garnier’s decorative scheme announces the monument’s purpose, the form a manifestation of the function. A visual prelude to the spectacle, the façade overwhelms the Place de l’Opéra, and “through seductive golds and colors, it invites them [spectators] to enter; it suggests sensual delight through the loggia bays’ marble hangings and the brilliant lights reflected in the mosaics.” In these three exact elements – polychrome marble, gilt, and mosaics – Garnier’s social awareness further illustrates itself. The implementation of each decorative media throughout the Opéra illustrates the ingenuity of Garnier’s execution. “The most common reproach against the Opéra is its provocative luxury, or, in other terms, of being a darling of flamboyant finery”; however, in each element of the monument’s construction, particularly these which connote the most luxurious cost, Garnier exhibited extreme fiscal awareness, concern and restraint, innovating to utilize novel techniques and reintroduce lost media in unfamiliar fashions to realize his dream of decorative splendor.

**Marble Polychromy**

For centuries, the Classical aesthetic canon asserted the dominance of the monochrome. As archeological campaigns, such as Hittorff’s 1820s dig that unearthed the Temple of

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41 Fontaine exterior, 49.
42 qtd. Ibid., 13.
43 Ibid., 62.
Empedocles,\textsuperscript{44} began to amass significant evidence that the Ancients worked in color and in fact relished it, the aesthetic agenda in France began to alter slightly. In 1848 and again in 1850, the Parisian Salon exhibited Charles Cordier’s polychrome bust \textit{Le Negre de Tombouctou}, and later in 1857 his colorful \textit{Negre en costume Algérien}, each bust incorporating disparate types of marble to create a vibrant, lifelike representation.\textsuperscript{45} Likewise, Garnier utilized colored marbles to enliven his monument, writing,

\begin{quote}
We must not let our thinking grow so gray and effaced in these color-free days, sad as the night and incapable of modifying the reign of this consistent colorlessness, this empire of perpetual monotony! The good Lord has thankfully arranged for other things, creating a world that loves the harmonious radiance of nature’s color, and in which we find that which satisfies our sentiments.\textsuperscript{46}
\end{quote}

It is in the façade that this exuberance is first presented, both visually and chronologically, as it was unveiled on 15 August 1867 for the Universal Exposition. Its “festive character can be resumed in one word: polychromy.”\textsuperscript{47} For Garnier, this implementation of color was more significant than simply a decorative trinket. He writes that in his monument he wished to “rediscover what is currently forgotten: respect for God, respect for the Chef, respect for glory, love of grand masterpieces and, finally, the sonorous fanfare of vibrant color!”\textsuperscript{48} Garnier was dutifully aware of his theater as essentially a monument to the senses, and in each element of his

\textsuperscript{46} « Il n’en faudrait pas tant pour que la pensée devînt aussi bientôt grise et effacée, dans ce jour incolore, triste comme la nuit, et impuissant à modifier ce royaume du terne persistant, cet empire de la monotonie perpétuelle ! Le bon Dieu, heureusement, a arrangé autrement les choses, et il a créé le monde de façon que ceux qui aiment l’éclat harmonieux de la nature colorée puissent trouver amplement de quoi satisfaire leur sentiment. » Garnier, 227-8.
\textsuperscript{47} Fontaine exterior, 62.
\textsuperscript{48} « Retrouve ce qui s’oublie maintenant : le respect de Dieu, le respect du Chef, le respect de la gloire, l’amour des grandes œuvres, et sonne enfin la fanfare sonore de la vibrante couleur ! » Garnier, 231.
decorative scheme he attempts to intimate this synesthesia, blurring the senses through the
decadence of overwhelming color. He writes that, of constructive media, marble and mosaic
“render polychromy most worthy of admiration,”49 and, as only a Frenchman could, discusses
the eminence of the first within his decorative scheme: “As bread is the first food, stone is the
first material, and, as it is not without charm to put a little jam on bread, it is not without grace to
place on these stones a more attractive and amiable matter,” namely color.50 In fact, marble as a
medium in general had fallen out of favor within the French architectural aesthetic canon and
was virtually unused “since Louis XIV and Versailles.”51 In an 1867 article in À travers les arts,
“Charles Garnier called for a new Renaissance wherein natural marble polychromy would
ultimately find its rightful place: ‘… Modern Paris already proudly displays its wide streets and
handsome monuments; future Paris would add seduction and charm of colour to these marvelous
silhouettes.’”52 The façade announces this emphasis on color, “proclaim[ing] the fact that grey
would not dominate this setting devoted to art and pleasure,” and, accordingly boasts a rainbow
of colored marble.53 It should be here noted that I employ the termed “marble” as Garnier
understood it, within the Ancient definition rather than the strictly geological one. “For the
Ancients, all stones susceptible to polish were collectively called ‘marbles,’ an appellation
thereby including granites, porphyry, jaspers and alabasters.”54

Colorful touches of these stones dance across the surface of the façade. The eight pairs
of monumental Corinthian columns are rendered in Ravière stone, (fig. 2) defining the structure

49 « La polychromie bien digne de toutes les admirations » Ibid., 232.
50 « Comme le pain est le premier des aliments, la pierre est le premier des matériaux ; mais il
n’est pas sans charme de mettre sur ce pain un peu de confiture ; il n’est pas sans grâce de mettre
sur ces pierres une matière plus aimable et plus attrayante. » Ibid., 233.
51 Fontaine exterior, 35.
52 qtd. Ibid., 67.
53 Ibid., 62.
54 Ibid., 75.
of the building in solid, monochrome fashion that nonetheless luxuriates in decoration, while, just behind these Ravière columns and one step towards the interior, the eighteen columns at the outer extremity of the loggia are presented in magnificent peach blossom marble, an Italian breccia termed pavonazzo from the word pavone, or peacock, for its “violent cement and pinkish-flesh, white, pale green, or even red fragments.”  From Serravezza in the Tuscan Apennines, Garnier documented in 1865 that the marble for the loggia particularly “came from the Rondoue quarries exploited by Monsieur Henraux.” The screens that superpose the lintel above these columns (fig. 4) feature gilded busts of operatic composers presented in circular negative space surrounded by a conglomeration of colored stones including Jura red stone, porphyry and Saint-Ylie stone, while the gilded name of each bust is inscribed in sea-green marble quarried in Genoa, Italy. The porphyry, an ancient annunciation of royalty, wealth and power in fact reserved by the Romans for their emperors, hails from Finnish quarries. Saint-Ylie stone, considered within the Jura group, is a beige stone flecked with violet, yellow and pink, and after 1857, became “the delight of Parisian architects.” The stone, which takes its name from the Saint-Ylie château, “does not freeze, possesses a great resistance to crushing, and polishes beautifully.” The interior face of the loggia both reflects the façade as well as announces the Grand Foyer behind it, advancing the decorative splendor and accentuating the polychromy (fig. 3). The engaged pilasters and columns are rendered in Jura red stone on a base

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55 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
57 Denotes that the stone was quarried in the Jura Department, situated at Saint-Amour, and, « d’un point d vue géologique, il n’y ait pas de vrai marbre. » Fontaine, Gérard, L’Opéra de Charles Garnier: Architecture Et Décor Intérieur (Paris: Patrimoine: 2004), 57.
58 « À partir de 1857, une pierre d’un beige rosé qui fera le bonheur des architects parisiens” Ibid.
59 « Ce calcaire très pur ne gèle pas, possède une très grande resistance à l’écrasement et peut prendre un beau poli. » Ibid.
of Spanish brocatelle marble, sea-green marble, *turquin* or bluish-grey marble and Languedoc red marble. The *turquin*, a term denoting a dark-blue matte appearance, was imported from Carrara, Italy\(^6\) and features beautiful veins of variegated blue. A domestic stone, the Languedoc red marble was “extracted from Caunes-en-Minervois, 20 kilometres from Carcassonne,” and was a favorite of French architects, employed in Versailles and the Grand Trianon.\(^6\) The deep red stone is colored with patches of dark violet and stark veins of white. The highly ornate capitals of each of the seven glass-paned doorways are capped by a medallion of Swedish green marble, a “green quartzite from the Jokopin quarries,” featuring quavering ridges of lines ranging in tone from light translucent jade to dark gray greens.\(^6\) In these details, the breadth of the Garnier’s geographic net, as it were, is flagrantly striking. The stones range in sources from Italy, which led the contributors, to Scotland, Finland, Sweden, Spain, Belgium and Algeria, as well as domestic sources.\(^6\) Such disparate locales suggest fiscal decadence, but in his writings Garnier strongly refutes this assumption, stating that it is simply that – an assumption. He writes, “The word marble makes bureaucrats shiver. One understands later that the belief is fanciful, and that indeed, marbles are economic… It is perhaps simply their introduction into poetry that has given the stone this reputation of splendor, and one imagines that, for the glory they are given in verse, that they must be as rare and as costly as diamonds and rubies!”\(^6\) Instead, Garnier asserts his own efforts and attention to the cost of his construction, exerting

\(^6\)“Also from Carrara, Italy, it is a white-veined, bluish-grey marble (*turquin* signifying dark-blue matte).” Fontaine exterior, 76.
\(^6\)Ibid.
\(^6\)Ibid.
\(^6\)Ibid., 62-7.
\(^6\)« Le mot de marbre faisait frissonner tous les chefs de bureau. On verra plus tard que la crainte était chimérique, et que dans bien des cas les marbres sont économiques. … C’est peut-être même à leur introduction dans la poésie que ces marbres durent leur réputation de splendeur, et l’on s’imagina que, pour avoir la gloire d’être mis en vers, il fallait qu’ils fussent aussi rares et aussi coûteux que les diamants et les rubis ! » Garnier, 235.
extreme effort to minimize expenditure. As an example, he details his search for the appropriate marble for the large columns of the central staircase, writing,

Essentially, I knocked on every door, asking every marbrier to make the thirty columns I needed, and I did not succeed in any fashion. It went well with the Beyrede marble; but, it is an extremely expensive marble, and I could not pay eight or ten million francs for a single column. Finally, after a million debates, a million encouragements on my part, I decided on MM. Dervillé and Cie, Sarrancolin quarrymen, accepting the demand for a total price of 148,000F for all, comprising 4,933.33F per column. The chosen marble was very beautiful – one can see that now – with a harmony that is both soft and warm, recalling the tonality of the ancient marble portasanta.65

This strain to balance economy and aestheticism is ubiquitous in Garnier’s decoration. He works diligently to ensure that his edifice represents the apex of visual splendor feasible within its appointed budget. His writings pay great attention to reconciling the cost of his decorative endeavors, and, more often than not, the decadence of the rendered visual effect cloaks the frugality of construction, establishing a kind of veneer in the sense that the magnificent surface masks the inexpensive reality.

The central social axis of Garnier’s monument, the Escalier d’Honneur (fig. 5), is an absolute celebration of marble polychromy. The staircase is the apex of flânerie, designed in such a way as to enable one to look and be looked at, a space that “allowed spectators to admire the spectacle of the grand world, to contemplate new arrivals, and to see what was offered to

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65 « En somme, j’ai frappais à toutes les portes, demandant à tous les marbriers de me faire les trente colonnes dont j’avais besoin, et je ne réussisais guère. Il y avait bien le marbre Beyrede; mais c’est un marbre d’un prix tres élevé et je ne pouvais payer huit ou dix mille francs une seule colonne. Enfin, après mille débats, mille encouragements de ma part, je parvins à décider MM. Dervillé et Cie, exploitants des carrières de Sarrancolin, à accepter la commande pour le prix total de 148000F compris pose, soit 4933,33F par colonne. Le marbre choisi était fort beau – on peut le voir maintenant – et d’une harmonie douce et chaude, rappelant la elle tonalité de l’ancien marbre portasanta. » Ibid., 317.
them in spectacle.”66 The circulation that is encouraged throughout the vestibules of the monument culminates in this space where “color reigns.”67 It is an “astonishing exercise in fine marble, whose value gave its composer the nickname ‘the Veronese of architecture,’” after the Renaissance painter Paolo Veronese, so revered for his vivid use of color.68 Establishing a space that encapsulates the essential visual and overall sensory pleasure that the theater embodies, the staircase and the “four sides of this grand stage are a veritable stage front of precious marbles.”69

The steps and risers (fig. 6), which curve both concavely and convexly as the staircase graduates, are executed in Serravezza marble, a white Italian stone with soft veins of gray. In his 1869 article in À travers les arts, he asserts his frugality, noting that “the stairs and risers of the entire monument, all in Italian white marble or Swedish green marble, not only cost half the fixed price of marble, but are also more than 10 percent less expensive than the least expensive stone adequate for stair production.”70 The 228 balustrades along the staircase are rendered in Italian cherry red marble, which features a brilliant red tone and is “sprinkled with small patches and veins of white.”71 This balustrade rests on a base made of the same Swedish green marble featured in the loggia and is capped by a handrail of white Algerian onyx, characterized by deep yellow concentric rays. In this construction, Garnier commingles white, red, green and black,

66 « Permettent aux spectateurs d’admirer le spectacle du grand monde, de contempler l’arrivée des nouveaux venus, voire de s’offrir eux-mêmes en spectacle » Fontaine interieur, 34.
67 « Ici, la couleur regne. » Ibid., 37.
68 « Le grand escalier est un étourdissant exercice de haute marbrerie que valut a son compositeur le surnom de ‘Veronèse de l’architecture.’ » Ibid.
69 « Sur les quatre côtés du grand étage, ce sont de véritables avant-scenes de marbres précieux. » Ibid., 34.
70 « Les marches et contre-marches des escaliers du monument entire, toutes en marbre blanc d’Italie ou en marbre vet de Suède, ont non seulement coûté moitié cher que le marbre tarifié, mais aussi plus de dix pour cent moins cher que la Pierre la moins chère qui puisse faire de bons emmarchements. » Ibid., 37.
71 « Parsemé de petite taches et veines blanches » Ibid., 55.
each stone possessing trace elements of its neighbors’ coloration in order to group them visually and create a visually coherent whole.

The first flight of stairs is capped by a central doorway that opens toward the orchestra entrance and is flanked by two polychrome caryatids representing comedy and tragedy (fig. 7). Sculpted by Jules Thomas, these enormous statues enrich the tradition of polychrome marble statuary beginning in Paris, implementing many of the same stones as the staircase, namely cherry red marble, Swedish green marble and onyx, while introducing Siennese yellow marble in the execution of the sculptural bases and the figures’ crowns. Garnier took great pride in these figures, as he was forced to persuade Thomas to complete them. He writes, “I felt a sweet pride in thinking that I would revive polychrome sculpture on this scale… but Thomas was a bit afraid of the violation of tradition of high art, and he tried to convince me to complete these caryatids in white marble. I took my turn… [suggesting that like that] they would always have the air of two frozen phantoms.”

Pulling rank, Garnier convinced Thomas to continue, ensuring that the statues were realized, and, once completed, he and Thomas agreed that “these eminent caryatids would henceforth be counted as a perfect oeuvre among perfect oeuvres.” The open doorway between these figures features veneers of magnificent Italian violet breccia (fig. 8), a dramatic and colorful stone with “violet cement and fragments of violet, pink, white and pale green” that signals this move from the public circulatory area towards an even more decadent space. In his use of polychrome marble, Garnier looks to introduce a novel element to the French architectural

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72 « Je sentais comme un douce fierté en pensant que j’allais faire revivre sur une grande échelle cette sculpture polychrome… Mais ce brave Thomas fut un peu effrayé de cette violation faite à la tradition du grand art, et il chercha à me convaincre de faire des caryatides en marbre blanc. Je fus a mon tour… elles auraient toujours l’air de deux fantômes glacés. » qtd. Ibid., 39.
73 « Les caryatides de l’éminent statuaire sont désormais comptées comme œuvre parfaite parmi les œuvres parfaits. » Garnier, 311.
74 « Elle réunit dans un ciment violet des fragments violets, roses, blancs et vert pale. » Fontaine interieur, 50.
canon, implementing these colorful marbles in order to ultimately enhance the overwhelming visual effect of his decorative scheme. The space is meant to proclaim and revel in sensory splendor, as, similarly, the lyric art of opera does; yet, Garnier is fastidiously attentive to the cost required to render this visual effect. In this way, Garnier’s use of polychrome marble presents an image of luxury that is meant to dazzle its viewers, appearing to announce an exorbitant level of splendor, while masking Garnier’s extensive efforts of thrift. Likewise, in the other medium Garnier notes as the perfect illumination of polychromy, mosaic, the suggested decadence of the visual effect belies the truth of the economics.

Mosaics

During his education abroad, Garnier became entranced by the mosaics of the Italian masterpieces, and, in the decoration of his monument, he desired greatly to reinitiate the medium into France. He believed himself to be mosaic’s champion, the first to declare its validity in French architecture. In fact, he indelibly states his influence in the construction, claiming his status as the medium’s initiator in France across the each extremity of the Ante-Foyer vault (fig. 9). In Greek characters, two inscriptions read: “These decorative mosaics were applied for the first time in France for the ornamentation of this vault and the popularization of the art. The figures painted by Curzon were executed by Salviati, and the ornaments by Facchina. The architect is Charles Garnier.”75 However, this notion of his novelty, despite the declaration, is false. At the end of the eighteenth century, the medium made a brief resurgence in France, at which point “a mosaic factory similar to the one at the Vatican was created,” and placed under

75 « La mosaïque decorative a été appliquée pour la premiere fois en France pour l’ornamentation de cette voûte et la vulgarisation de cet art. Les figures peinte par de Curzon ont été executes par Salviati, les ornement par Facchina. L’architect est de Charles Garnier. » qtd. Fontaine interieur, 134.
the direction of the Italian artist, Belloni. Napoléon I’s empire favored the art, evident in
Belloni’s mosaic pavement of the Louvre’s Melpomène Room, as well as the creation of the
École impériale de Mosaïque. After the fall of the first empire, this École’s appellation altered to
the Manufacture national de Mosaïque, only to quietly disappear in 1831.

Nonetheless, Garnier writes in his *Le nouvel Opéra*, that “from the moment work began
on the Opéra, I wanted to use enamel mosaics, having long been attracted to them and hoping to
bring them to France.” He believed that the art in France “appeared to have been lost,
considered to be the art of barbarians,” and perceiving its true value, wanted to reinstate it within
the French aesthetic canon. In his decorative dream, he wished to decorate the ceiling of the
auditorium with the medium and, enlisting several Italian mosaicists, he presented his idea.
However, the mosaicists, Cristofoli and Mazzioli, informed him that such a decorative plan
would take ten years and an exorbitant cost to complete. Upset, but realizing that “it would not
be logical or economic, and perhaps, would detract from the other decorations of the stage,” he
instead looked to integrate mosaics into other decorations of the edifice. A bit at a loss as to
how to best utilize the Italians he had hailed from their homeland, he directed their craft towards
the circular ceiling panels of the loggia of the façade, which was to be unveiled during the 1867
Universal Exposition. These panels conceal the underlying iron structure of the loggia,
providing an interesting instance of Garnier innovation to achieve his decorative end, as the use
of iron construction in a monument was yet to be fully integrated into the French aesthetic, as

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76 Mead, 67.
77 Ibid.
78 qtd. Ibid.
79 « Un art qui semblait perdu et que l’on considérait même comme un reste de barbarie » Garnier, 235.
80 « Ça n’aurait peut-être pas été bien logique ni bien généreux ; car une telle voûte, ainsi
exécutée, aurait certainement nui par sa tonalité franche et intense aux décorations de la scène. »
Ibid., 234.
well as his use of veneers, pasting a panel of elaborate, beautiful mosaics over the hidden reality of the structure. In the vivid greens, blues and reds, not to mention gilt, of these medallions, the mosaicists rendered seven unique dramatic masks of comedy and tragedy (fig. 10), an apparent and recurring motif in the Opéra’s decoration.

In the execution of the mosaics, Garnier and the artists under his commission introduced a new laying procedure that remains widely used. It is referred to as “the ‘indirect method’ (in Italian, *metodo a rovescio su carta*, literally ‘upside-down on paper method’) [and] consists of gluing enamel tessera onto heavy paper according to the desired design reproduced in negative, then applying the ensemble onto a layer of fresh plaster.”81 The traditional method, known as the “direct method” involved individually placing each tessera “one by one onto the layer of plaster, [and was] a very long, costly task.”82 In this introduction of new procedural techniques, Garnier’s preoccupation with innovation in order to satisfy his decorative requirements and budgetary constraints is evident. Rather than blindly adhering to the predilections of predecessors, Garnier continually searched for new ways in which to bring visual splendor to his edifice with a minimum of pecuniary ramifications. In a fashion, this can be seen to stem from Garnier’s working class roots, as he was consistently aware and attentive to the cost of his decorations in a way that architects seldom are. Despite his desire to create a monument to luxury, he was painfully aware of the fiscal implications of each decorative element. As in the old adage “necessity is the mother of invention,” Garnier here strains his, and his artist’s, powers of imagination in order to fully realize the visual grandeur his vision of the Opéra demands, manifested in the implementation of the new laying procedure.

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81 Fontaine exterior, 67-8.
82 Ibid., 68.
In his serial publications on the Opéra, Garnier is meticulously dedicated to validating this economy of his decoration, as the most common criticism leveled at the monument is, indeed, its decadence. It is clear, however, through Garnier’s figures that throughout his selection of materials and techniques he exercised great frugality. He cites that the cost of the mosaics of the loggia was “45 francs per linear meter,”83 “or 2,700 francs today,”84 which roughly translates to $530 US currency.85 As a result, Garnier was able to commission the mosaicists, along with two others,86 to complete the entirety of the monument’s floors (fig. 11), each space unique in design with embellishments upon the elemental geometric shapes so admired by the Beaux-Arts and foreshadowing the vegetative, naturalistic motifs favored by Art Nouveau, as well as to complete the vault of the Ante-Foyer, the constructive and visual prelude to the Grand Foyer.

The ceiling of the Ante-Foyer (fig. 12) presents an absolute celebration of mosaic, and, as Garnier writes, “Not just for myself, but for the whole world, one of the most successful and the best-received elements of the Opéra, without contest, is the galleries of the Ante-Foyer”.87 As in much of Garnier’s decorative scheme, the motif is Classical, and the four central panels portray mythological pairs of lovers – presented from stage left to stage right, Diane and Endymion, Aurora and Cephalus, Orpheus and Eurydice, and Psyche and Hermes (fig. 13).88 Each pair is masterfully rendered, based on “drawings by [painter] Paul Alfred de Curzon” and manages to

83 « 45 F le mètre linéaire » Garnier, 237.
84 Fontaine exterior, 68.
86 Facchina and Del Turco; Fontaine exterior, 67.
87 « Une des choses les mieux trouvée et les mieux réussies de l’Opéra est, sans conteste, non seulement pour moi, mais encore pour tout le monde, est cette galerie de l’avant-foyer » Garnier, 243.
88 Ibid., 132.
bring a painterly aesthetic to the incredibly difficult medium.\textsuperscript{89} The scenes playfully flout gender stereotypes, presenting “four pretty women who are fully-dressed and four handsome men who are mostly nude,” and in the panels of Diane and Aurora, these women control the composition. Diane, in a wave of drapery, floats above Endymion, appearing to support the weight of his lifeless body, whose arching arm, grouped visually with the curves of her drapery, reaches to caress her neck. Aurora also carries completely nude Cephalus; however, the pair’s composition greatly recalls and subtlety reverses the traditional Pietà, with his graceful form spanning across her lap while he adoringly gazes upon her somber countenance. In the other two panels, the men reclaim a more traditional role; however, the composition is still consumed by and relies on the female figures. Hermes’s form is presented in relation to that of Psyche, as he attempts to guide her, arm wrapped around the small of her back and moving form pressed close to her static one, almost as if to spur her into movement. Her flowing folds of drapery are vividly colorful, making her solemn, almost forlorn, form the panel’s focal point. In Orpheus and Eurydice, the composition is more shared; however, visually, the swooping lines of drapery as well as the more linear outlines of anatomy are grouped in order to circulate eye movement towards her form, more specifically to her face. This emphasis on the female, when understood in conjunction with the contemporary alteration of the placement of women within the theatre, further suggests Garnier’s understanding of the importance of his monument as a social space. With the advancement of scenographic technology, intermissions became longer, and the spectators were sent into circulation for much greater periods of time, and, for the first time, women were included in this circulation. “Until then, society women had traditionally received visitors in

\textsuperscript{89} « Dessinés par Paul Alfred de Curzon » Ibid.
their boxes as it had been inconceivable that they exit to promenade about in the foyers.”

Able now to partake in the wonders of the circulating foyers and vestibules, Garnier presents these women an iteration of their own power and presence, the Ante-Foyer’s four mythological muses visual embodiments of feminine influence.

**Gilt**

The Ante-Foyer ceiling vaults are, indeed, a decorative oeuvre. However, despite portraying a vivid, full spectrum of color, the overwhelming visual splendor of the ceiling originates in the use of gilded elements, as this gilt catches and joyously reflects the light cast by “five grand gilded bronze chandeliers, designed by Garnier himself.”

Most apparent in his decoration of the Grand Foyer (fig. 14) and the auditorium, gilding is ubiquitous in the monument, quite literally sparkling with opulence as the ultimate annunciation of luxury. In this decorative element, however, the dichotomy between appearance and reality in Garnier’s decorative scheme further illustrates itself, presenting an image of decadence that conceals the reality of fiscal frugality. Historically in French construction, two methods of gilding were employed. The first, *dorure en plein*, covers a piece entirely in gold, while the second, *dorure en rehaussé*, applies gold leaf to select areas, specifically to contours that catch and reflect light, while the remaining visible surface of the piece is painted in white, producing “always a bit of a petty appearance,” according to Garnier.

In his construction of the Opéra, however, Garnier introduces a third method, often employed during the Italian Renaissance, whose “artists had, innately, a grand decorative sentiment.” Termed *dorure à l’effet*, this type of gilding greatly

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90 Fontaine exterior, 14.
91 « Cinq grands lustres de bronze doré dessiné par Charles Garnier lui-même » Fontaine interieur, 135.
92 « Toujours un peu mesquin d’apparance » Garnier, 47.
93 « Alors que les artists avaient tous, inné le grand sentiment decorative » Ibid.
resembles *dorure en rehaussé* with the exception that, in this technique, the un-gilded surface is painted in a tone specifically generated to match “the exact value of gold in shadows and half-light.” In this way, the gilded elements of the Opéra create a kind of mirage, one in which Garnier succeeds in “disguising relative misery under apparent richness.” Garnier writes that “the process uses three or four times less gold, and, naturally, it costs three or four times less than previous techniques” with the same lavish visual effect, stating that “*dorure en plein* costs approximately 30F, while *dorure à l’effet* costs 15F when made to be viewed closely and 5F when meant to be viewed from afar.” In particular, he details the procedure and cost of his auditorium, which relishes in gilding. One of the original competition’s requirements outlined that the auditorium of the new Opéra’s plan must recall the greatly admired auditorium of the theater on rue Le Peletier, re-gilded by Rohault de Fleury in 1853 with little restraint. Garnier writes: “The gilding of this auditorium, without worrying a soul, cost in sum 53,000F. … It is a simple rule of proportions: if an auditorium [like Le Peletier] of 1,700 meter surface area cost 53,000F, then how much should an auditorium [like the Opéra] of 4,400 meter surface area cost? The response: 137,176F. *Eh bien*, the new auditorium, with all of its finishes, cost a total of 47,520F.”

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94 “La valeur exacte que ces ors auraient dans les ombres ou les demi-teintes” Ibid.
95 “C’est ce qui a lieu à l’Opéra ou le mirage existe, et c’est en somme un éloge qui m’est adressé puisque j’ai si bien réussi à déguiser une misère relative sous une richesse apparente.” Ibid., 49.
96 “Il y a dans ce procédé trois ou quatre fois moins employé que dans celui de la dorure en plein, naturellement il doit coûter trois ou quatre fois moins cher que celle-ci.” Ibid.
97 “La dorure en plein revient à 30 F environ, et la dorure à l’effet à 15 F lorsqu’elle est faite pour être vue de près, et à 5 F environ lorsqu’elle doit être vue de loin.” Ibid., 50.
98 “C’est cette salle enfin, qui, sans qu’on s’en préoccupât, avait coûté pour sa dorure totale en somme de 53 000 F ! … Une chose bien simple, une modeste règle de proportion, celle-ci : si une salle ayant 1700 m de surface a coûté 53 000 F, combien coûterait une salle ayant une
132,000F. These figures make clear the extent to which Garnier innovation benefited his project’s budget without sacrificing visual luxury, illuminating Garnier’s perpetual “battle between art and money.” The visual suggestion of gold, creating a scandal of decadence, belies the mundane, frugal reality of the surface, establishing, as in his implementation of marble polychromy and mosaics, a sensory celebration that revels in the opulence it appears to profess but in reality does not possess. In this way, Garnier’s Opéra can easily be perceived outside of the simple definition of a monument to the decadence of the Second Empire, as it is indeed not decadence in and of itself that is celebrated, but instead the sensory splendor engendered by perceived decadence that Garnier’s edifice memorializes.

Darkness in the City of Light: The Disillusion of the Seconde Empire, the Prussian Invasion of 1870-1871 and the Vulnerability of the Opéra’s Completion

The element that necessarily underlies each of the decorative media here discussed is light. Garnier constantly plays with this portion of visual spectacle in his monument, enlisting numerous artists to erect statuary light fixtures, such as Albert Ernest Carrier-Belleuse’s two magnificent bronze groups (fig. 15) that frame the Escalier d’Honneur, as well designing his own chandeliers, including the stunning crown of light in the auditorium, “composed of 268 frosted surface de 4 400 m² Réponse : 137 176 F. … Eh bien, la nouvelle salle, y compris tous les apprêts, a coûté en tout 47 520 F ! » Ibid., 51-53.

99 Ibid., 54.
101 As Garnier responds to complaints of decadence: « Cet or qui vous choque n’est presque toujours qu’un peu d’ocre jaune qui, passé à trois couches, coûte environ dix-sept sous le mètre. C’est cet ocre jaune, un peu mélangé avec du gris et du rouge, qui trompe vos yeux et vous fait crier au scandale et à la prodigalité ! » Garnier, 46.
glass lamp globes, posed in four series of fifty round lanterns,“\textsuperscript{102} and strategically placing mirrors (fig. 16) to capture light and produce the effect of “infinite vision.”\textsuperscript{103} This vision proclaimed by the Opéra, however, was threatened before the edifice’s completion. Before even the Prussian pressures of 1870, the whispers of political unrest and the deterioration of the Empire were discernable. “The empire had derived its initial strength from the failure of the Second Republic and from the fear of ‘anarchy.’ These memories and arguments were losing their hold over men who were beginning to forget the past; they had no effect on the new generation, which, being far more concerned with the constraints of the present, aspired both to a freedom whose risks it had not experienced and to greater social equality.”\textsuperscript{104} The social stratification of the Seconde Empire was growing more and more endangered by the rise of the proletariat, and “despite the regime’s claims to have eliminated socialism, working-class ideology was advancing and evolving,” illustrated in the 17 February 1864 publication of the “Manifesto of the Sixty, the first class-based charter of a French labour movement.”\textsuperscript{105} Further, the social geography of Paris and France at large was overturned during the period that followed the capitulation of Napoléon III to Prussian forces during the Battle of Sedan at Metz.\textsuperscript{106} As the Prussians moved towards the capital, the city experienced “a grave reversal of the spaces, routines, and social distinctions that had structured Second Empire everyday life, a rupture of the

\textsuperscript{102} « La couronne de lumiere de l’entablement est composé de deux cent soixante-huit lampes a globes de verre dépoli posés sur la corniche et de quatre series de quinze lanterns rondes. » Fontaine interieur, 95.
\textsuperscript{103} « À l’effet de vision à l’infini » Ibid, 137.
\textsuperscript{104} Plessis, 152.
\textsuperscript{105} Ibid., 160.
\textsuperscript{106} “In Lorraine, Bazaine allowed himself to be trapped at Metz. In an attempt to relieve him, what was left of the French troops – followed rather than commanded by a sick emperor – blundered into the Sedan basin, where they were encircled. By 1 September, the only possibility left was to capitulate. Napoleon III was taken prisoner.” Ibid., 169.
Those in the impoverished outer suburbs of Paris, or the banlieue, were left “most vulnerable to the danger and inconveniences wrought by the simultaneity of the Prussian onslaught and French military preparations.” These people streamed into the city streets, wagons filled with their possessions, while those capable of fleeing the city left in a mass exodus. “In the words of Mme le Chatelier: ‘Half of Paris goes far away, [while] the banlieue comes in, in a flurry.’” The city was completely overturned, and the infrastructure that had once held the capital, and the nation, together was completely undercut. The city suffered a further blow to its essential character in the rationing of gas.

The country was at war, and “the Parisian Gas Company (la Compagnie parisienne du gaz) could only guarantee two months’ worth of fuel, so cafés were placed on half-rations of gas, and only every other streetlamp was lit. On the 20 November, gas was declared to be especially scarce.” This element that had become an integral part of the fiber of the Parisian lifestyle and culture – light – was restricted. The illumination of the city was a particular mark of the Seconde Empire and Haussmann’s building campaign, as one of his central objectives was to furnish “ever more light in public places.” The darkening of Paris, along with the inundation of Parisian streets with residents of the banlieue, signaled a distinct and definite rift from the Empire. The war grievously and irrevocably altered every space. The Opéra was no exception, completely transforming to aid in the war effort. The building “underwent especially drastic alterations, transformed with Charles Garnier’s help into an immense military and provision

108 Ibid.
109 Ibid.
110 Ibid., 52.
111 “Paris had been known as the City of Light since the eighteenth century.” Ibid., 51.
112 Ibid., 52.
depot: ‘Upon the vast spaces of this palace of marble and gold, Garnier installed kitchens and officers’ lodgings; and an infirmary for the wounded.’” Further, there was concern that the Prussians would disrupt the aqueducts that supplied the capital’s water. The Opéra had been “built over a pool of water from the heights of Montmartre. He [Garnier] drilled out the layer of concrete on which the foundation of the monument rested; and caused a river to shoot forth and filled the vast depths of the lowest basement with water,” forming a subterranean lake that is immortalized in Gaston LeRoux’s *Le Fantôme de l’Opéra*. Further, the “roof became a semaphore station constantly signaling to other such stations on top of the Arc de Triomphe, the Panthéon, the Ministry of the Marine, the heights of Montmartre, and the huge fort of Mont Valérien.” This essential transformation of the space is metaphorically visualized in an oil painting by Jules Didier and Jacques Guiaud, an installment in the Binant series that catalogued scenes from wartime everyday life. In the painting, entitled *Réunion de bataillons de marche sur la place du Nouvel-Opéra (décembre)*, the Opéra looms above an overwhelming mass of small-scale figures, composed primarily of assembled *bataillons du marché*, but, tucked in the right corner of the canvas at the front of the picture plane, stand a finely dressed bourgeois couple, an illustration of the collision of the two social spheres in the chaos of wartime.

The theatrical world similarly experienced a rupture for the traditional norm. The declaration of war in July of 1870 wrought a change in “theatre as a spectacle, business and art form.” Patriotism flared, and “demands for *La Marseillaise* began to interrupt performances, commemorated in an unidentified newspaper illustration, *La Marseillaise à l’Opéra et à la

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113 Ibid., 60.
114 qtd. Ibid.
115 Ibid.
116 Ibid., 82.
Marianne stands central in the prints, holding a French flag and rallying support with arms outstretched in an expressive gesture. As the French military outlook began to sour, so did the sentiment in the theatres, and a “9 September decree from the préfet de police officially closed all the theaters and places of entertainment.” Small instances of street theatre occurred, with “scrappy pieces of popular theatrics presented on the street and various patriotic plays that were no substitute for the real thing” appearing to attempt to fill the theatrical void left during the Siege. These plays signal a key transition in the theatrical world, bringing the theatre into a public, universally accessible sphere. This cardinal shift would become even more apparent when the opera reopened on 4 November. “The old habitués were chagrined to discover that the seating prices had been dropped so low that the opera had become ‘popular,’” and the social change that had been building for years was finally apparent in this previously reserved sphere. On 5 January 1817, the building pressure and anticipation of the Siege of Paris finally broke as the Prussians began bombarding the city on 5 January 1871, marking “the first occasion of the indiscriminate bombardment of a civilian population.” This ultimate disruption of the every-day further destroyed the structure of previous social strata, as it “wrought an excessive seriousness and vulgar familiarity among people.” The social skeleton of the Seconde Empire was broken by the Prussian Siege of Paris, altering the entirety of its composition.

In March, several months after the Parisians surrendered to the Prussians in late January, la Commune, the result of a working-class uprising, was established, rattling the Troisième

117 Ibid.
118 Ibid., 83.
119 Ibid.
120 Still housed at the salle on rue Le Peletier.
121 Hollis, 83.
122 Ibid., 65.
123 Ibid., 84.
République that had been inaugurated after the fall of Napoléon III. It was brutal and short-lived, collapsing in May, but again signaled the growing power and presence of the proletariat in the Parisian social and political landscape. The Franco-Prussian war resolved in May, and life began to attempt to rediscover a sense of normalcy. Garnier’s Opéra remained unfinished while he pleaded to recommence work on the building with little success. “The State’s finances were very bad; France had to pay five billion [francs] in indemnities to Germany and many posed the question to what point the State must follow ‘the extravagant expenditures’ of the abhorred regime [the Seconde Empire]. Work ceased; Garnier fell ill, a victim of nephritis.”124 Operas continued to be shown at the salle Le Peletier, and Garnier’s masterpiece appeared to be subject to dereliction. The Le Peletier theatre, however, “was ravaged by fire of unknown origin during the night between 28 and 29 October 1873. … This disaster, nonetheless, had a happy consequence: the government decided to dispense the last funds for the ‘nouvel Opéra.’”125 Some expenditures were cut, and “whatever had not been gilded before 1870, never was.”126 Nonetheless, construction was completed, and the building was inaugurated, a lavish spectacle of social prominence and lyric art commemorated in Jean Baptist Edouard Détaille’s shimmering gouache work *Inauguration of the Paris Opera, 5 January 1875*. This monument to opulence, which eclipsed the actual operas and ballets in reviews of the inauguration, overwhelmed the senses of all who ambled through its magnificent vestibules and foyers, which now included

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124 « Les finances de l’État étaient au plus mal, la France devait payer cinq milliards d’indemnité à l’Allemagne et nombreux se posaient la question de savoir jusqu’à quel point l’État devait poursuivre ‘les folles dépenses’ d’un régime abhorré. Les travaux furent arrêtés ; Garnier tomba malade, victime d’une néphrite. » Marry, 14.

125 « Les opéras continuaient d’être donnés dans la salle Le Peletier lorsqu’elle fut ravagée par un incendie dont on ne connut jamais l’origine, dans la nuit du 28 au 29 octobre 1873. … Ce désastre eut cependant une conséquence heureuse : le gouvernement se décida à débloquer les derniers crédits pour le ‘nouvel Opéra.’ » Ibid., 14-15.

126 Fontaine exterior, 71.
those, like women and the working class, who had previously been restricted. In his implementation of decorative techniques, Garnier strove to present these viewers with a surface that whirled them away from reality, into the decadence temple of pleasure and art, straining himself and his craftsmen to render the surface as opulent as possible, ultimately masking the inexpensive reality with optical illusions of decadence. Garnier invested his whole self into the monument, the building an expression of his own rise from the Parisian banlieue into success in the most exclusive of societal spheres, the Parisian bourgeois. His personal presence in the monument, not only manifested in the Opéra’s common nomenclature, is inscribed into the structure’s physical surface. On the ceiling of the circular vestibule for abonnés, he interlaced the words “Charles Garnier, Architecte, 1861-1875” (fig. 17), later writing, “I made the Opéra, and for better or worse, I will sign it... It is not self-love, it is loyalty.”

His Opéra is intrinsically tied to himself, manifesting in its construction his own social mobility. He extends his fanciful dream of art to the public, presenting to the Parisian world an indisputable vision of opulence on the façade of his monument, which draws each and every viewer into his dream of spectacle that is accelerated to vertiginous heights through his decorative scheme, visually manifesting the sensory celebration that the Opéra as a theatre embodies.

127 « J’ai fait l’Opéra, bon ou mauvais, je le signe ; ... ce n’est pas de l’amour propre, c’est de la loyauté. » Garnier, 278.
Figure 1: Opéra façade

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Figure 2: Façade’s Ravière columns (also pictured Carpeaux’s statuary group *La Danse*)
Figure 3: Marble polychromy on interior loggia façade
Figure 4: Loggia screen
Figure 5: L’Escalier d’Honneur
Figure 6: Steps, risers, balustrades and handrail

- Algerian onyx
- Italian cherry red marble
- Serravezza marble
- Swedish green marble
Figure 7: Jules Thomas’ *La Comédie* and *La Tragédie*
Figure 8: Italian violet breccia
Figure 9: Garnier’s inscription across the Ante-Foyer vault
Figure 10: Loggia ceiling panels
Figure 11: Selection of Opéra floor mosaics
Figure 12: Vault of the Ante-Foyer
Figure 13: Mythological lovers in the Ante-Foyer

Diane and Endymion

Aurora and Cephalus
Figure 14: Grand Foyer
Figure 15: Albert Ernest Carrier-Belleuse’s bronze statuary light fixtures
Figure 16: Light reflected to infinity in the mirrors of le Salon de la Lune
Figure 17: Garnier’s signature in the ceiling of the Vestibule of *Abonnés*
Bibliography


